

Haitian orphans brought to Pittsburgh

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Fifty-three Haitian children are starting new lives in the United States, after a weeklong rescue effort that spanned from Ben Avon to Washington to Port-au-Prince culminated with their arrival at Pittsburgh International Airport Tuesday morning.

Accompanied by Gov. Ed Rendell and U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, Ali McMutrie met her goal of getting the children, under the care of her and her sister Jamie, out of the BRESMA Orphanage and to the United States, where many will be adopted as soon as this week.

Jamie McMutrie stayed behind with one orphan, a twin who got lost in the hectic scene at the Port-au-Prince airport, Rendell said. She was to return to the United States on Tuesday.

Rendell and Altmire, who accompanied doctors, McMutrie family members and a mountain of medical supplies on a chartered flight to Haiti Monday afternoon, said it appeared that the return trip might not happen when there were questions by Haitian officials about a number of the children who didn't have adoptions finalized or whose paperwork had been lost.

"We got on the ground, and there was some confusion about how many of the children had visas to get to the United States," Rendell said at a news conference outside the airport Tuesday morning. "But that was something Congressman Altmire was able to work out."

Altmire said he first got in touch with the White House about the McMutrie sisters a day or two after last week's devastating earthquake, and it turned out that contact proved to be helpful when it appeared the group would be stranded Monday night.

"I called the White House, and they got all hands on deck," Altmire said. "The state department and the National Security Council worked on it for a few hours, and we were ready to go."

There was one additional problem: The chartered plane had already departed Haiti after offloading a mountain of supplies organized by Brother's Brother Foundation, a Pittsburgh-based international relief organization. But the Air Force stepped in, offering space on a C-17 cargo plane that was empty and about to return to Florida.

"The plane had a one-hour window before it had to leave, and we needed more time than that to get everything ironed out," Altmire said. "Thankfully, the military stepped in and got us on the cargo plane that took us to Orlando."

Advertisement During a news conference Tuesday morning, Ali McMutrie said leaving any of the children behind was unthinkable.

"We have a family. We love each other, and we care for each other," she said. "Leaving any of them behind just wasn't an option."

McMutrie also said she was thankful for the efforts, from politicians to family and friends to a social networking campaign that spread the word about their shattered orphanage to millions of people, to get the children out of Haiti.

"All I can say is thank you, thank you, thank you," she said. "The support has been overwhelming."

After arriving at Pittsburgh International Airport Tuesday morning, the children were taken to Children's Hospital in Bloomfield, where they were to receive medical attention before being processed by the Allegheny County Children and Youth Services department. Catholic Charities has arranged for the children to stay in Pittsburgh-area group homes until their adoptions can be completed.

Rendell said that in spite of the delays, the kids weathered the trip to Pittsburgh well.

"They were great," he said. "Some of them slept, some of them were excited. And it's pretty clear that this really is a family, with two of the best mothers you'll ever see."

LOCAL RELIEF EFFORT

Mayors of local municipalities have agreed to accept donations from residents for American Red Cross disaster relief in Haiti.

Midland Mayor Angela Adkins said she was watching news reports from Haiti and decided she had to do something to help. She phoned several other mayors from Beaver County, and all have agreed to accept donations at their municipal buildings. They will send the donations to the Red Cross at month's end.

In addition to Midland, mayors from Aliquippa, Industry, Monaca and Ohioville confirmed that they are participating in the effort.

Borough officials will accept only checks made out to the American Red Cross with "Haiti disaster relief" written on the memo line of the check.

Residents can send or hand-deliver checks to their municipal buildings.

Adkins said she encourages mayors from other communities to participate.